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ABSTRACT

Lake Charles, Louisiana established a language bank capable of providing interpreters for 20 foreign languages. All participants are volunteers who offer to help free of charge in case of emergencies arising because of the considerable numbers of foreign visitors in the area. Smooth operation of the language bank depends on the following: (1) an organizational and administrative committee; (2) volunteers who know English as well as one or more foreign languages and offer their free services; (3) a comprehensive file of volunteer information and languages and a file enumerating services, without volunteer information; and (4) any community agency to act as a 24-hour clearinghouse. It is extremely important to assure volunteer privacy. In establishing a language bank, information on need should be gathered from police departments, hospitals, tourist bureaus, the chamber of commerce, local school board, and other sources. Local news media can help gather data and recruit volunteers. Information disseminated about the program should be simple and clear, and a laminated handout sheet is very useful. Circulation should be as wide as possible. An informal initial meeting for volunteers, staff, and organizers and periodic meetings for exchange of experience and support should be scheduled. Benefits in Lake Charles include increased community self-awareness and goodwill. (MSE)

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VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY LANGUAGE BANK

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Volunteer Community Language Bank

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Two years ago Lake Charles, Louisiana, established a Language Bank capable of providing interpreters for some 20 foreign languages. All participants are volunteers who offer their help free of charge in case of emergencies that may arise because of the considerable number of foreigners coming to the area. Lake Charles has an international harbor; local industry and import-export businesses are global in scope and have world-wide connections, and tourism to and through the area is on the increase and can be expected to rise considerably in view of the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans and the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. In order to cope constructively with the growing number of emergency situations which require translating services, a volunteer language bank was brought into being.

What Is a Language Bank?

A language bank is a community self-help service which serves as a communication link between Americans and foreigners who do not know English well enough to handle emergency situations. Community agencies such as police departments, hospitals, and tourist bureaus are often confronted with emergencies where the very life of an individual or his freedom or safety may depend upon finding an interpreter for him.

International tourism to this country is on the increase. Contrary to common belief, many foreign visitors know little or no English, and when they run into problems they are absolutely lost and in need of an interpreter.

In the Lake Charles area, there is a large demand for the Language Bank services and in many diverse cases and situations the group has been called upon to assist. A foreigner may have an accident, for example, and not be able to give the doctor permission to operate nor can the visitor answer questions asked by the police. Since other communities may find themselves in similar circumstances, this paper will share experiences and make practical suggestions on how to establish a language bank similar to the one in Lake Charles.

The smooth operation of a language bank depends upon several different yet interrelated elements:

1) a language bank committee for organizing, overseeing, and updating the services. This committee keeps in touch with the volunteers, solicits feedback, updates the lists periodically, and recruits new volunteers.
2) volunteers from the community who know English as well as one or more foreign languages and who offer their interpreting services free of charge in case of emergencies. Names, phone numbers and foreign languages spoken by the volunteers are maintained in a central file and are accessible through a clearing house.
3) two different types of files or lists. One comprehensive file contains a listing of all available languages and of the volunteers and their phone numbers; a second one merely enumerates the services as well as the foreign languages represented, without information about the volunteers. The latter is designed for distribution.
4) a clearing house. Any community agency which is staffed 24 hours a day can serve as a clearing house. This agency receives and screens incoming calls and connects the caller with the appropriate foreign language interpreter. In Lake Charles the Sheriff's Department serves this function, and the director of communications handles the Language Bank telephone. The phone number of the Sheriff's Department thus serves as the Bank's publicized phone number.

Assurance of Privacy

It is extremely important to be able to guarantee the privacy of the Language Bank volunteers. In order to achieve this, only two parties should have access to the names and phone numbers of the volunteers: the clearing house for connecting caller and volunteers, and the Language Bank committee for overall management of the operation.

Assessment of a Community

Any group interested in establishing a language bank should start by gathering information from local police and sheriff's departments, hospital emergency wards, tourist bureaus, the Chamber of Commerce, the local School Board, etc. Some of the items to consider are these: How many foreign natives with limited English language knowledge reside in the area (possibly as older dependents or guests of locally employed immigrants); of what nationalities are these? How many transient internationals travel to or through the area as tourists or on business, such as ship crews in a harbor town?

If the results of the survey indicate that a language bank is needed, it is advisable to secure—from the very beginning—the endorsement of some established community agencies and to get their approval and support. It is particularly important to enlist the help of the local news media, both in the recruiting stage as well as later in publicizing the available services.

People are usually surprised at how many multi-lingual persons live in their midst and how many different languages are represented by these. A basic cadre of volunteers can be recruited easily through the local educational systems, international organizations like France-Amerique, Latin-American and German Clubs, as well as through ethnic restaurants. However, the Lake Charles group got the best response by advertising through the news media, who did it free of charge as a public service. Media announcements had the advantage of finding volunteers with a wide distribution of languages.

Dissemination of the Services

Information should be simple and clear. The public needs to know the basic purpose, nature and function of the service, the languages available and which number to call. This information should be disseminated in a number of ways. Two very effective means are announcements by the news media and the distribution of a one-page information sheet. Similarly, the service can be publicized through talks, articles, radio and television interviews, and by word of mouth.

Hand-out Information Sheet

In the long run, the hand-out is probably the single most useful item for dissemination of information. Here is the way the Lake Charles flyer begins:

491-3700
Calcasieu Parish Sheriffs Dept.
LANGUAGE BANK TRANSLATORS
for Emergency Use Only
The following foreign languages are available for emergency translations...

This one page sheet should be laminated and receive the widest possible circulation: it can be distributed to hospitals, airports, train and bus stations, tourist bureaus, harbor authorities, police departments, and courts, mayor's offices, Chambers of Commerce, State Parks, camping places, YMCAs, churches, School Boards, Red Cross, banks, hotels, motels, restaurants, shopping centers, retail merchants (through their respective associations), gas stations along Interstates, plants and factories, and the telephone company.

Follow-up Activities

After recruiting volunteers and establishing the practical aspects of a telephone center, it is wise to organize an informal get-together for all parties involved. At this point many questions may remain unanswered which can be discussed and cleared up. It is also useful to initiate a personal dialog between the different volunteers, the clearing house staff, and the Language Bank organizers.

It is helpful to schedule further informal meetings about once every six months. These meetings serve two purposes. The get-together affords all members an opportunity to share experiences with each other, to support one another and to acknowledge contributions. Furthermore, it can also serve as a recruiting device if one runs ads on radio, TV and in the newspapers, soliciting new volunteers shortly before the get-together.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge publicly the contributions of the language bank volunteers whenever possible. And also, the volunteers should be invited to international activities at the university or in town. This publicizes not only their services but also the availability of the language bank itself.

The Lake Charles group has been able to reap from its activities two interesting and unexpected side benefits. In recent months there has been an increase in community awareness of international aspects of the area, of the benefits as well as the responsibilities arising from these and of the importance of mastering a foreign language. This is attributed in part to the high visibility of the Language Bank and to frequent use of the emergency services. But the Language Bank has in addition brought together individuals

and agencies who share a common concern for global understanding and cooperation. A spirit of solidarity and good will is developing in the most unlikely places and promises to bear results far beyond those envisioned by the originators of the Language Bank.